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Interdisciplinary and Cultural Perspective on the Internationalization of Higher Education: A Focus on East Asia

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Abstract

Recent studies have shown that the meaning of internationalization, the means to implement it and the extent of internationalization policies depend much on specific subject matter. The general situation is that the “hard” sciences usually attain higher levels of internationalization than the “soft.” Development in the “hard” sciences, like engineering, tends to be much more emphasized, while the humanities and social sciences become under-represented in international programs. This is due basically to the varied ideologies, paradigms and discourses inherent in the humanities and social sciences and the high dependency on language to convey their meanings. In these fields, domestic considerations are given more weight than in the natural sciences, technology, and medical sciences. In East Asian societies, humanities and social sciences scholars have not achieved the emerging visibility of their natural science and engineering peers in the international community. Few publications produced by East Asian social scientists have appeared in international citation indices.

Internationalization also means differently to higher education systems with different cultural roots. To East Asia, modern universities are foreign transplants. East Asia’s strikingly different cultural roots and heritages have led to continuous conflicts between their indigenous and the imposed Western higher education values. East Asian universities have their institutional establishments based on Western values on one hand, and another system supported by traditional culture on the other. The two systems often do not support each other. Instead, constant tensions between them reduce the efficiency of university operation. Although there have been strong attempts to indigenize the Western idea of a university, little has been achieved. The Western concept of a university has been taken for its practicality. This is precisely the bottleneck of East Asia’s future higher education development. We might need to ask whether or not there is a ‘middle-income range/trap’ in East Asian higher education development?

While East Asia’s recent achievement in higher education has been widely agreed, assessment of its future development is not. To some, East Asian universities are poised at the most exciting phase of their development, leaping ahead to join the distinguished league of the world’s leading universities. To others, East Asian universities generally still lag behind the best universities in the West. The notion of ‘world-class’ status in East Asian societies has been largely imitative rather than creative. Financial and other resources combined with some innovation strategies can make progress only so far. A kind of “glass ceiling” is to be reached soon. Adopting a perspective that gives weight to the impact of traditional ways of cultural thinking on contemporary development, this paper explores the true meaning of the internationalization of higher education in East Asia, and appraises its significant implications for the future development of East Asian higher education, with some specific focuses on the humanities and social sciences.